Meditation and Insight I
What is Insight?

An Introduction to a Non-Residential Teaching Retreat
with
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Insight is a common word, so most of us have a reasonably good idea of what it means. But our goal here is specifically to "de-mystify" the way this word as used in connection with Dharma and meditation practice. The Pali word that is translated as "insight" is *vipassana*. *Passana* means "seeing," and the prefix *vi* makes it into something like "special seeing" or "seeing the essence." Insight is such a good translation of *vipassana* that a better understanding of the meaning of insight in English can help us achieve Insight in meditation practice.

Let's begin by examining what we ordinarily mean by "insight." Clearly, insight involves a kind of *understanding*. More specifically, it is an understanding that pertains to *cause and effect relationships* within a given context. In ordinary usage, insight, can refer to:

- An intuitive understanding of the underlying nature of a thing or a process: an insight into the way something or someone "really" is, beyond surface appearances.
- Grasping the internal relationships and behaviors that characterize a particular system: the way something "really" works.
- A person's ability to acutely observe, penetrate, and discern the nature of something: "Let's ask her opinion, she has good insight."
- A personal, introspective understanding: "I need some insight into why this keeps happening to me, why I get myself into these situations."

These same ideas are expressed a bit more precisely in the Dictionary.com definition of insight:

1. an instance of apprehending the true nature of a thing, especially through intuitive understanding: *an insight into 18th-century life*.
2. penetrating mental vision or discernment; faculty of seeing into inner character or underlying truth.
3. *Psychology*.
   a. an understanding of relationships that sheds light on or helps solve a problem.
   b. (in psychotherapy) the recognition of sources of emotional difficulty.
   c. an understanding of the motivational forces behind one's actions, thoughts, or behavior; self-knowledge.

So how well does this relate to meditation and Dharma? The first definition certainly works. In terms of Dharma, the "things" we want "to apprehend the true nature of" are: our minds, our own selves, and the larger reality we are a part of. The second definition also fits the purpose of meditation quite well: to achieve a "penetrating mental vision" that allows us to see more deeply into "underlying truths." Interestingly, the third definition, from psychology, is stated in terms of problem solving, therapy, and introspective self-knowledge, all of which seem to be relevant to the Insight meditation project.

But there is another important point about insight that the above definition misses. That is, the events that people normally refer to as *insight* are typically associated with a *sudden* change in understanding; and with seeing connections and contradictions in a situation or a problem *that were not previously recognized*. When an insight manifests suddenly, such as understanding how to solve a difficult problem, it is sometimes described as an *epiphany*. Also, notice that the word intuitive has been used more than once. That's because what we usually call insight doesn't seem to be the result of ordinary reasoning and thinking. We don't really know where they come from, insights just appear.

Keeping all this in mind, let's look more closely at what psychologists have to say about insight. To begin with, it seems that both therapeutic insight and the insightful self-understanding mentioned in the definition above happen in ways that are similar to *problem-solving through insight*. This has allowed psychologists to gain valuable insight into the nature of insight by studying problem solving.

The solution to a problem is arrived at in one of two ways. In the first, the answer comes slowly and methodically, as the result of conscious analysis. The problem solver is quite aware of the steps leading to the solution, and can use this same information to explain or help verify the correctness of the solution. This is *non-insight problem solving*. The other way that solutions come about is when the answer appears suddenly, unexpectedly, and it is often difficult for the problem-solver to describe the logic behind the solution. The source of the solution seems to be intuition rather than thought. This is *insight problem solving*, and involves things like seeing the problem in a new way; connecting the problem to another problem for which a solution is already known; letting go of past experiences that were preventing the solution from presenting itself; or seeing the problem in the context of a "bigger picture".

To study the differences between these two ways of problem solving, psychologists have developed special "insight problems."[1] What has been learned by studying people as they solve these problems is quite interesting. For example, fMRI and EEG studies indicate that something different happens in the brain right before a problem is solved through insight as compared to non-insight problem solving. There are also differences in left and right hemisphere brain

[1] These are problems that force participants to use objects in a way they are not accustomed to; to use spatial ability in an unusual way; or require verbal ability.

The first type of problem forces participants to use objects in a way they are not accustomed to (thus, breaking their functional fixedness), like the "Duncker candle problem". In the "Duncker candle problem", individuals are given matches and a box of tacks and asked to find a way to attach a candle to the wall to light the room. The solution requires the participants to empty the box of tacks, set the candle inside the box, tack the box to the wall, and light the candle with the matches.

The second type of insight problem requires spatial ability to solve, like the "Nine-dot Problem". The famous "Nine-dot problem" requires participants to draw four lines, through nine dots, without picking their pencil up.

The third, and final, type of problem or requires verbal ability to solve, like the Remote Associates Test. In the RAT, individuals must think of a word that connects three, seemingly unrelated, words. RAT can be solved both with and without insight. From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insight

activation during insight versus non-insight problem solving. These suggest the right hemisphere plays a unique role in insight.

Some other interesting differences:

- People solving non-insight problems can accurately predict when they are getting close to a solution, how "hot" or "cold" they are. This is not true for people solving insight problems, the solutions to which appear without warning.
- People who are “in a better mood” are more likely to solve problems through insight. Positive feelings of joy and happiness have a unique effect, increasing the brain activity patterns characteristic of insight immediately before and while a problem is being solved. On the other hand, people experiencing anxiety solve fewer problems through insight. This is a point of special interest to meditators.
- Allowing study participants to take breaks improves their performance on insight problems as compared to participants who don’t get a break.
- Adequate sleep helps to produce insight, while sleep deprivation impairs it.

What Makes Insight Special, and Where Does It Come From

There are four stages to solving a problem: Preparation, incubation, solution, and verification. When we prepare to solve a problem, we focus our attention on the ideas and information relevant to a solution, and set aside irrelevant factors. This is a *conscious process* that is called *selective encoding*. The next stage, incubation, is where the problem gets solved, so that’s where we need to look to understand the two different ways they get solved.

In the incubation stage, we engage in a process of combining and recombining all the information we’ve deemed relevant in the preparation stage, searching among those new combinations for a solution. This is basically a trial and error process, and is called *selective combination*. We also compare the present problem and its *potential* solutions with past problems and *actual* solutions that have similar features. This is *selective comparison*. It helps us in vetting possible solutions arrived at through selective combination, and also provides us with an additional source of possible solutions.

When combination and comparison occur consciously, they are experienced as logical and analytical thought processes, based on reason. But selective combination and comparison are also taking place at the *unconscious* level as well. Both conscious and unconscious processes are involved in both insight and non-insight problem solving. As it turns out, the most fundamental difference between insight and non-insight is *where the solution comes from* – the conscious mind, or the unconscious mind. When the solution emerges from the conscious mind, the approaching solution is seen in advance, and so it comes as no surprise. It is also seen to be the result of logic and reason, and so the processes that led to it are clearly understood. On the other hand, when the solution emerges from the unconscious mind, it’s a surprise. Not only don’t you see it coming, but it is also experienced as “intuitive,” because it’s a mystery where it came from or just how it was arrived at. As you can see from this, intuition and insight are just different manifestations of the same thing – unconscious information processing.

What we've focused on so far is the final solution to a problem. But in the process of actually solving a problem, both the conscious and unconscious systems usually interact. First the conscious mind sets up the problem. Then both the conscious and unconscious minds begin to work on it. In the simplest scenario, conscious reasoning will lead directly to the solution, or else a perfect insight solution will immediately leap to mind. But it's not usually so simple. Instead, while we are consciously thinking the problem through, new ideas for how to solve the problem will "pop into the mind." This is insight, although not necessarily an "insight solution" yet. We then evaluate these ideas and decide whether they're useful or not. This is verification through logical analysis. If these ideas don't give us the solution we're looking for, we continue to ponder the problem, and as we do, more new ideas will keep emerging into consciousness for consideration. When we eventually solve the problem, the solution may be in the form of a sudden, intuitive insight delivered from the unconscious, and then we'll call it an insight solution. On the other hand, we may have the conscious experience of the "pieces all falling into place" as a result of systematically thinking about the problem, in which case we'll call it a non-insight solution. But either way, both conscious and unconscious processes have, in fact, contributed to that solution.

So far we've explained why insight is experienced is sudden and intuitive. Its simply because insight comes from the unconscious mind. But there is another, far more fundamental and important difference between conscious reasoning and intuitive insight that we have yet to discuss. The *conscious* mind readily solves problems that are "simpler" in that the solution requires only logical processing of immediately available information. But for more complex problems with unusual features, the *unconscious* mind is much better at providing solutions.

What makes intuitive problem solving so superior to non-intuitive problem solving for more complex and subtle problems? It is that consciousness is a single, sequential process, while the unconscious mind involves *very* large numbers of mental processes, all going on simultaneously. To put a very modern label on it, it is the difference between serial and parallel processing. Because there is only one conscious mind, for sake of efficiency it must limit itself to only the *most likely* combinations and comparisons *as determined by logic*. This is particularly limiting with regard to the process called *selective comparis*on, which involves comparing with previous experiences. Accumulated past experience is vast, and there are only so many comparisons that can be squeezed into a given period of time, time which must also be shared with other conscious processes. Because there are many unconscious "minds" working on the problem rather than just one, unconscious processing has no such limitation. This explains why it can so readily produce solutions that involve unusual ways of seeing the problem. The unconscious mind is much freer to try out radical combinations and comparisons that may not at first appear logical. Because selective comparison plays such an important role, insight solutions are often allegorical and metaphorical, and we often use analogies when explaining them to someone else.

Finally, as if that weren't enough, the unconscious mind also has access to *everything* going on in the conscious mind, including its partial successes as well as its failures, so it can takes advantage of this information. The conscious mind, on the other hand, has access to *nothing* that goes on in the unconscious mind *until it becomes conscious*.

Recall that there is still one final step in the process of problem solving – verification of the solution. Even logical non-insight solutions need to be verified through practical application, of course. But intuitive insight solutions *must also be validated* by higher order "thinking" processes like logic as well. This is something that always occurs in consciousness, and it is where the conscious mind once again comes into its own. Many otherwise effective solutions are simply not acceptable for social, legal, moral or all kinds of other reasons. Also, a solution that perfectly fits the *general* pattern of the problem may still not match the *specifics*. In other words, it may work in principle, but not in practice. So as you can see, it's not a matter of one or the other, conscious analysis or intuitive insight, being inherently better than the other. They complement each other perfectly. Together they are far more powerful than either one could ever be by itself. We see this in ordinary experience, because we all know people who tend to rely too heavily on either logic or intuition, to their disadvantage.

Insight and Worldview

As the human mind matures, it builds a working model of the universe from accumulated experience. This model of the universe is the source of a person's "worldview": the way they perceive the world each morning when they wake up, and the way they interpret each new situation they find themselves in throughout the day. Our minds also create a working model of who we think we are, the ego-Self, which in turn gives rise to our "self-view." All of this happens in the unconscious mind.

A very large part of the experience used to construct this model of reality consists of "insights" that have solved problems for us in the past. Thus we can say that cumulative insight experience is the source of a person's intuitive view of reality. As we find ourselves in novel situations, those insights are continually being refined, or else abandoned and replaced. As for the *accuracy* of these intuitive views of reality, the very most that can ever be said is that the *individual parts* of the models have worked at some time in the past.

But as time goes on, everything changes, and so what worked well at one time may no longer do so. Whenever a person's current experience is incompatible with their existing worldview, things don't turn out as well. That constitutes a major "insight problem" – i.e., a problem that can only be solved at the level of the unconscious mental processes responsible for "insight." Thus insight is also the process by which a person's model of the universe changes, becoming more sophisticated and more functional over time. But just as insight solutions to ordinary problems get verified through rational examination and practical application, so must adjustments to our working model of reality be similarly validated. This happens as the result of a sort of "executive function" taking place in the conscious mind that evaluates each new insight as it arises.

Psychiatrists and psychologists attempt to guide their patients to use insight, first to recognize the nature of their problem, and then to make appropriate adjustments to their worldview and self-view. The reason a patient can't recognize the nature of his or her problem on their own is that their mind has devised ways to avoid confronting problem. In other words, it remains invisible to them. Why? Perhaps because it's just too painful or fearful, or they might be holding so tightly to a mistaken view that they won't allow themselves question it, or all of the above. To overcome this avoidance, the therapist must guide the patient to confront precisely those experiences that are creating conflict and suffering because their model of reality doesn't work. Confronting those

experiences directly presents the mind with an "insight problem," which both the conscious and unconscious minds can then work together to solve. In the very moment that an "insight solution" gets validated in consciousness, a shift takes place at a deep unconscious level that changes the patient's intuitive perception of reality. That particular shift may be large or small. But if there are enough of these insights producing enough of these shifts for the patient to become a happier and more functional person, the therapy succeeded.

Insight and the Buddhadharma

Psychiatrists and psychologists might think most of us aren't doing so badly, but we all know we could be happier, wiser, and more functional than we are. The Buddha is the great therapist who has understood the problem: suffering, our own and what we inflict on others; the immediate cause: craving; the ultimate cause: a dysfunctional view of reality; and the ultimate solution: Insight. He is reaching across 2500 years to guide us in confronting precisely those experiences that clearly demonstrate that our current model of reality isn't working. These are the *Insight Experiences* that arise in meditation. When we can recognize these experiences and confront them with a properly prepared mind, it poses an "insight problem" for the mind. Then, both conscious and unconscious mental processes are activated to find a way of altering our view of reality that resolves the problem. Once a solution to the "insight problem" posed by an Insight Experience has been produced by the unconscious mind and verified in consciousness, we have achieved actual *Insight*. Because of the nature of Insight, and its fundamental relationship to our view of reality, true Insight produces permanent changes in how we see the world, and how we behave in response to it.

This weekend we will discuss the difference between Insight and Insight experiences; how meditation leads to Insight experiences; and how Insight experiences can become actual Insight. This will be supported experientially through guided meditations. We will also distinguish between "supramundane" Insight, and ordinary or "mundane" Insight, both of which are very important to the progress of Insight in meditation.

The Insight process overall is divided into 18 attainments or "knowledges," called the "Progressive Stages of Insight." These 18 Knowledges are grouped under five "Purifications." Actually, there are 7 Purifications, but the discussion of Insight assumes that the first two, Purification of Virtue (*sila*), and Purification of Consciousness through Concentration (*samatha*), have either already been achieved, or are being cultivated simultaneously. Here are the five Purifications and the 18 Knowledges that mark the progress of Insight:

The Progressive Stages of Insight

Purification of View

1. Analytical Knowledge of the Mental and the Physical

Purification by Overcoming Doubt

2. Knowledge by Discerning Conditionality
3. Knowledge by Comprehension by Groups
   (The Eighteen Great Insights)

Purification by Knowledge and Vision of Path and Not Path

4a. Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away (I)
   (The Ten Distractions from Insight)

Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Way

4b. Knowledge of Contemplation of Arising and Passing Away (II)
5. Knowledge of Contemplation of Dissolution
6. Knowledge of Appearance as Fearful
7. Knowledge of Contemplation of Danger/Knowledge of Misery
8. Knowledge of Contemplation of Disenchantment/Knowledge of Disgust
9. Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance
10. Knowledge of Contemplation of Reflection/Knowledge of Re-observation
11. Knowledge of Equanimity About Formations
12. Insight Knowledge Leading to Emergence
13. Conformity Knowledge/Knowledge of Adaptation
14. Maturity Knowledge/Change of Lineage Knowledge

Purification by Knowledge and Vision

15. Path Knowledge
16. Fruition Knowledge
17. Knowledge of Reviewing
18. Attainment of Fruition